

Elijah Parish Lovejoy: Journalist for Justice

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Reverend Elijah Parish Lovejoy is often remembered specifically for his death in defending his printing press and the right of free speech in Alton, Illinois. In the history books this is the focus. He was more than just a martyr for the freedom of speech, however. Lovejoy was also an important journalist in the history of Illinois and the United States. His anti-slavery, anti-censorship writings were a much needed voice at a time when many people in Illinois just did not want to think or talk about slavery. He refused to be quieted, and defended his right to freedom of the press until the end. Lovejoy's abolitionist writings and fight for the freedom of speech were influenced by his religious beliefs and stirred a movement in Illinois that changed the whole country.

Elijah Parish Lovejoy was born on November 9, 1802, in Albion, Maine, the son of Elizabeth and Reverend Daniel Lovejoy. Always a good student, Lovejoy went to Waterville College, a Baptist institution, in 1823, where his teachers noticed his great skill in writing. He then moved to St. Louis, Missouri where he started his own private high school. Following that, he became a partner in the publication of the St. Louis Times. Upon attending the First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Lovejoy experienced a religious conversion that caused him to enter the Theological Seminary at Princeton. He graduated from Princeton and gained the right to preach from the presbytery in 1833. Upon returning to St. Louis, he started the St. Louis Observer, a newspaper in which he attacked Catholicism and slavery. It was very unpopular among the people of St. Louis

and he was mobbed many times. On July 21, 1836, he wrote in the Observer that due to mobs in St. Louis, he was moving to Alton, Illinois and taking the Observer with him.

Lovejoy's writings for the rest of his life in Alton dealt mainly with two subjects: slavery and freedom of speech. When it came to these things, Lovejoy did not hesitate to speak out. In his first article in the Alton Observer September 8, 1836, he made his anti-slavery views clear when he wrote, "The system of negro slavery is an awful evil and sin." In an article printed in the Observer on September 28, 1837, he called for a statewide convention to form an anti-slavery society. He invited his fellow Illinoisans to "come up to the rescue, and let it be known whether the spirit of freedom yet presides over the destinies of Illinois, or whether the dark spirit of slavery has already so far diffused itself through our community as the discussion of the inalienable rights of men can no longer be tolerated." He did not do this without opposition. Citizens of Alton held a meeting to try to censor his writings about slavery in the Observer. Lovejoy refused to be censored however, and wrote back to those who held the meeting, contending that slavery "is a subject that . . . must be discussed, must be agitated . . . I hope to discuss the overwhelmingly important subject of slavery, with the freedom of a republican and the meekness of a Christian." The opposition he faced and the attempts to censor him (his press was destroyed three times in a little over a year) led him to write about freedom of speech. In the same article calling for the anti-slavery convention he wrote, "Take away the right of Free Discussion – The right under the laws, freely to utter and publish such sentiments as duty to God and the fulfillment of a good conscience may require, and we have nothing left to struggle for."

Lovejoy was a strong believer in the ideas he wrote about, and religion played an influential role in these beliefs and his determination to be heard. His father was a Congregationalist minister and instilled in Lovejoy his obligation to get rid of sin in preparation for the second coming. The ex-mayor of Alton and St. Louis, Joseph Brown, said while others preached on the wrath of God “Mr. Lovejoy . . . talked constantly of the love of God to man and the way he had provided for his salvation.” Indeed, Lovejoy believed very strongly in God’s grace and His ability to help man through hard times. In a letter to his brother Joseph, Elijah Lovejoy wrote, “I have found God a very present help in this my time of need. He has gloriously fulfilled his promises, and held me up, so that I have been astonished at the little effect produced upon my feelings by these outrages.” The strength Lovejoy gained from religion kept him standing up for what he believed even when his life was in danger. In his last speech he declared triumphantly, “I have concluded . . . to remain in Alton, and here insist on protection in the exercise of my rights. If the civil authorities refuse to protect me, I must look to God, and if I die, I am determined to make my grave in Alton.”

Elijah Lovejoy’s writings against slavery and the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society changed the course of Illinois history. However, what had the biggest impact nationally was his martyrdom for free speech. He was trying to protect his fourth printing press from an angry mob when he was shot and killed on November 7, 1837. The story of his death influenced a national abolitionist movement. Among the important people he influenced were William Henderson, a partner to and influence on Abraham Lincoln, and William Trumbull, who later became the author of the Thirteenth Amendment. Lovejoy would not have wanted his death to be remembered as his most

important contribution to the anti-slavery movement and the fight for free speech. It is important to remember his life as a journalist, because his writings helped change the shape of Illinois history as much as did his martyrdom. [From Joseph Brown, “Lecture on Early Reminiscences of Alton,” Feb. 21, 1896; J. A. Halderman to Elijah Lovejoy, July 11, 1837; Elijah Lovejoy to B. K. Hart, L. J. Clawsois, A. Olney, and John A. Halderman, July 26, 1837; Elijah Lovejoy, “The Observer-Removal,” St. Louis Observer July 21, 1836, <http://www.state.il.us/hpa/lovejoy/article4.htm> (Aug. 18, 2005); Elijah Lovejoy, speech at public meeting in Alton, Nov. 3, 1837; Paul Simon, Freedom’s Champion; State Convention, Alton Observer, Sept. 28, 1837.]